



'BIRDS ON A WIRE

THUNDERBIRDS ARE GO.

REGION 4 PULLS A FEW STRINGS AND SCORES A CHAT WITH PUPPETMASTER, GERRY ANDERSON.

INTERVIEW BY ROHAN KELLY

R4 How did you first hit upon the idea The Thunderbirds?

GA Years ago there was a mining disaster in Germany when a lake over a mine collapsed when the bottom of it fell out. The whole lake just poured into the mine tapping a lot of miners underground. At the time this was being constantly covered on the news broadcasts. The mining engineers worked out where there were likely to be survivors and, over a period of two weeks, they drilled first of all a very narrow bore and dropped a microphone down to determine... yes... there were people alive down there. Then they had to drill a hole, one meter in diameter, in order to drop a safety device down there where they could haul the guys up one at a time. This whole rescue took two weeks and finally they got them out. I followed the news of this drama closely. The next day I get this call from Lou Grade, my production manager, asking me if I could come up and see him at the studios to tell him what my next show was going to be about. So here I am driving up to see Lou and thinking that it's got to be about rescue, it's very exciting and it's a very noble thing, but you know, this series has got to be set 100 years ahead of time and it's going to need some pretty futuristic equipment, and if we have that then obviously there will be spies trying to get hold of it so we better hide it somewhere, well how about an uncharted island in the Pacific? By the time I got to Lou's office I told him all about International Rescue and that really is how it started. May I say as a matter of interest, when I went up to Lou Grade he said "What's the new idea, have you got a new idea?" I said "I have but I'm not sure you are going to want to back this one." I said that because I knew it was going to be terribly expensive. He leaped out of his chair, came around the desk and grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and dragged me into the centre of the office, he pointed up to the ceiling and said "Can you see that lamp up there, that bulb?" I said "Yes" then he said "Gerry, if you want to make a series about that light bulb I will back it."

R4 As far back as the mid sixties did you consider live action characters for Thunderbirds instead of Puppets?

GA Oh, I always wanted to use live action right from the beginning of my career. I hated using puppets. But the problem was that I was always saying to the financiers and broadcasters "Look these shows of mine are just like live action aren't they? I could make a live action show you know" and they responded by saying "Hey doesn't he make good puppet films, lets give him some more." So I got stuck with it.

R4 To what do you attribute the show's long running success?

GA Well I can't give you one answer to that, there are a lot of answers. First of all... the character of the shows, they look like nothing else on television, so that kind of singles them out for special attention. Then, in the case of Thunderbirds, kids love to have death and destruction on the screen, well this gives them that, but it's good because it's about saving life and not destroying it. It has the family atmosphere of Jeff Tracy and the boys, the love affair with Tin Tin and Alan, comedy with Penelope and Parker, the arch villain The Hood, futuristic machines... it just seems to have everything.

R4 Do you think people who grew up watching Thunderbirds are now introducing their children to the show, thus extending the appeal?

GA Oh they are... undoubtedly. Thunderbirds has parental approval but also I meet a lot of people who, because of Thunderbirds, have gone into space related careers like space medicine. I met a guy a couple of weeks ago who is an astrophysicist and he's working on a component of a spacecraft that is going to Mars in two years time. He invited me over there with all his people to have a look around and then to my surprise he told me he is a member of my fan club, and then he told me the reason I'm doing

this work is all your fault! A lot of people have gone into aviation and what have you because of these shows.

R4 How long did it take to film an average episode? How many people were usually involved?

GA Ok, got your calculator out? We had two puppet units, in other words the puppet element was shot by two full film crews. So we had two lots of puppets and two lots of sets and every model, and then we had three special effects units so that's five units and they all shot for two weeks per episode. So the answer is two weeks per episode, or ten weeks per episode depending on which way you want to look at it.

R4 The archival footage in the Vol 2 special features option shows a very reluctant Derek Meadings being asked how the flying effects were achieved. Now 35 years on are you prepared to divulge the secret?

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GA That was filmed during the making of Thunderbirds and we were busy creating a lot of mystique so that people wouldn't copy us, but in fact it was just a question of very very fine wires. The wires were only five thousandth of an inch thick and made of tungsten especially drawn for that purpose...then it was a question of lighting and flagging off the reflected light from the wires. This is quite difficult when you want light on the craft but not on the wire. Then we used to paint a lot of the wires into the background i.e. if it was against a blue sky, we would paint the wires blue.

R4 Is it true that the late Stanley Kubrick approached you to do the special effects on 2001: A Space Odyssey?

GA Yes he did, and the story behind that is very simple. I got a call from Stanley Kubrick's production manager one day and he told me that Mr Kubrick wants to have lunch with you because he would like you to do the special effects on his film 2001. I said to this guy that I am a great fan of Stanley Kubrick, because I loved the war picture he made called *Paths of Glory*, but can you tell him that I can't do the effects as we only do them for our own production company but I would love to have lunch with him. He phoned back the following day to say that he had another message from Mr Kubrick saying that Mr Kubrick would like to have lunch with you because he would like me to be a special consultant on the picture. I said to tell him I'd still love to have lunch with him but I can't possibly be a consultant for him either. Then the next day I received a final call from him saying that he had a message from Stanley Kubrick, I asked him what the message was and he simply said "Mr Anderson, Stanley Kubrick doesn't want to have lunch with you". Had I realised how big the picture was going to be I might have changed my mind.

R4 Did you ever voice a character in any of your series?

GA Well the answer is yes and no. We had a series which had a robot and we wanted a robotic voice. We went to Edinburgh University where they were studying the human voice and they gave me a vibrator pack, which I had to hold up to my chin, and this produced a constant tone inside my mouth. When I mouthed the words we got this robotic voice, so it was my voice but on the other hand I modulated it.

R4 Do all the original puppets and craft still exist today?

GA Oh no, there are a couple around the world, I know that there are a couple at least in Melbourne. I have got the original puppet of Parker and a beautiful copy of Lady Penelope, these are going on sale shortly. As for the models there is the odd one with collectors who keep them wrapped up in cotton wool, but these days there are a lot of copies that have been made and some of them are wonderful.

R4 Cigarette smoking puppets, Asian servants and foreign looking bad guys. What is your reaction to those who say that Thunderbirds are not politically correct and unsuitable for children?

GA If I had my way I would take political correctness and dump it in the river. I have got no time for it at all. If someone said you shouldn't have smoking in a children's programme I would immediately agree, but you know if we were to say we can't show any film that has smoking in it that would wipe out most of the history of film. So what can you do? We were going for realism after all.

R4 For years there has been speculation about a live action Thunderbirds movie, what is the latest on that front?

GA The rights for a feature film were acquired by another production company some time ago. They wanted to make the film but didn't get far with it at all and the whole

project folded. The answer to your question however is that when the rights revert, the following morning I will be through the door to do a new series and a feature film.

R4 What do you make of the fan adulation and the multitude of web sites about you and your shows?

GA Well I don't want to sound churlish but it's something I don't understand at all, but it is very nice. It's good to have entertained so many people over such a long period of time.

R4 I believe well known and respected Australian actor Charles "Bud" Tingwell is an acquaintance of yours and had some association with the Thunderbirds. Is that correct?

GA Yes indeed. Charles worked with me in England on Thunderbirds as a guest artist for some of our many voices we required and was with us pretty much all the way through. Last time I was in Australia he had heard about an appearance I was making at a convention and he tried to catch me there. He phoned me the next day and said that he had tried to see me there but the queues were so long he couldn't get in.

R4 What do you think of present day children's action series, especially those produced completely by CGI?

GA I think they are terrific. I don't mind how they are made just so long as they are made well. We have done a pilot for a remake of Captain Scarlet which we have done completely using computer imagery. I have to tell you it looks fantastic, better than any CG series I have seen, just wait until you see it.

R4 What is your opinion of the DVD format?

GA I think they are splendid. To be able to view your favourite show with such clear picture quality and no interference in Dolby 5.1 sound at home is just terrific.

R4 What next for Gerry Anderson?

GA I have a few projects presently. There is a feature film funded from Japan, there is the remake of Captain Scarlet in CGI and again another film for cinema called *A Christmas Miracle*. That all sounds terrific but I have been in the business a long time so if one of those three materialise I would be delighted.

ANDERSON ON ANDERSON SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY



STINGRAY (1964)

"My first show in colour and the first show I was reasonably pleased with."



CAPTAIN SCARLET (1967)

"A different direction, possibly the wrong direction with less strings and anatomically correct puppets. The show however seems to be growing in stature and is usually considered next favourite after Thunderbirds by fans."



JOE 90 (1968)

"The mistaken belief that puppets could carry a series on their own with less hardware"



SPACE 1999 (1975)

"Looked a million bucks but actually cost several million. I did the first season but the rights were sold to the U.S. for the second season and ruined by the same person responsible for the third season of Star Trek."